The Beginner's Guide to Blogging and Content Strategy

Contently

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by Contently.com

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“Content marketing is the only marketing left.”

- Seth Godin

INTRODUCTION

The Beginner's Guide To Blogging and Content Strategy

You're reading this book because you believe in the power of content.

It's a reasonable guess. But I admit, I don't know much else about you. You may be a marketer at a small business, an editorial director at a brand or media company, a community manager at a startup, or perhaps a blogger who's passionate about New York City pizza.

Whatever your role, in whatever size operation, the one thing I can say is this: great content can help you achieve your goals.

The most powerful and influential people in any industry have always been the content creators, the thought leaders.

The tallest buildings in major cities used to all be owned by newspapers. Times Square wasn't named for a clock; it was named for the New York Times building built there. The heroes in any niche – be it fashion, investing, pop culture, whatever – are the ones who create the best content. Scott Schuman, Mark Suster, Perez Hilton. The ones everyone wants speaking at their conferences.

Through content you can build your own publication, be an authority on your topic, or make a serious splash for your brand in social media. If you didn't think so, you wouldn't be reading this. You're reading this because you want to create content better, faster, and with more social oomph.

It all starts with strategy. Content creation takes time, but it's well worth it if coupled with strategy. It's science, but not rocket science.

Let's get started.

Why Most Companies Fail

Blogging is like exercising. You know it's important. You don't really doubt it will produce results at some point. But you're also probably going to quit after 3 weeks.

That's just how it goes with anything that requires long-term, consistent effort.

The reason most people don't look like Arnold (back in his glory days, at least) is because they don't dedicate a serious amount of time to working out (and steroids). The reason most companies' blogs have crickets and cobwebs for audiences is they don't create and execute a consistent plan of action. They don't stick with it. (And they don't use blog-steroids like social media and distribution tools).

Author and marketing czar Seth Godin has said, "Content marketing is the only marketing left." He, and about 2/3 of Chief Marketing Officers in the U.S., believe that creating content is the key to growing a successful business in a web 2+ world.

Adam Schwartz, founder of Articulate.com, says "Content marketing is the easiest and most inexpensive way to market any company." He built a $200 million business by creating useful, educational content that his readers could trust, content that didn't plug his products or sell out as advertorial. At 80,000+ subscribers, Articulate is a thriving media company in addition to being a commercial business.

Forward-thinking brands like Mint, American Express, Birchbox, and hundreds more rely on content to generate leads, build brand affinities, sell goods, and create advocates and fans. Their content is incredibly effective.

But most companies suck at content.

There are three reasons most companies fail at content:

1) They don't invest in quality content

2) They don't execute consistently

3) They don't promote or optimize their content

If you've tried content strategy before and failed, chances are it's because of one of these. This book is split into three sections – planning, executing, and optimizing – precisely for those reasons.

Time to get some exercise.

PART 1: PLANNING A CONTENT STRATEGY

Defining Goals

Before you embark on your blogging journey, you need to figure out where you're going.

Imagine what success looks like. Think of the perfect-world scenario, with your content strategy delivering the perfect results.

Is success having tons of subscribers to your blog? Are you going after sheer numbers of repeat pageviews, so you can sell CPM ads? Or are you more concerned with readers gaining trust in your brand and eventually doing something for you, like signing up for a product?

Is success outranking your competitors on Google? When you do outrank, what do you want random Google searchers to do when they find your content?

Is success having a respected reputation in your industry, with other blogs and publications quoting you and seeking your advice? Do you want buzz, influence, and notoriety?

Be more specific. How many subscribers do you want? Who do you want respecting you in the industry? How many conversions a month is success?

Define concrete goals, then trace them backwards to actionable steps that will lead you there. The next few sections will help you decide what those steps should look like.

Identifying Audience & Habits

The first rule of blogging is *know who you're talking to*.

The second rule of blogging is *know why they should care*.

To be effective, you want to have a very clear picture of who is going to be reading your content, and where your content fits into their daily life.

Most people only frequent a handful of sites a day. Think about how many sites you visit regularly. Can you name more than, say, 7? What does it take for a new site to make it on your must-visit list?

What will it take for *you* to make *your* potential audience care about *you*?

For ages, marketers have had a standard practice of building "customer personas" – defining the details of who their customers are. "*John is a 46-year-old family man in Illinois with a mortgage and a blue-collar job*." "*Sandra is a 27-year-old receptionist at a banking firm. She goes clubbing on weekends and loves Glee*." You get the idea.

This can be a useful exercise, especially if you have very specific criteria in mind. But perhaps you don't know exactly who your readers are or what prime-time musical dramas they prefer.

A better way might be to define your audience through another publication. "My audience are the people who read Lifehacker" or "My audience reads mommy blogs, but also have pets." This kind of audience identification also helps you define the unknown: where your audience hangs out.

Figure out what the audience you want is already reading, and you'll be able to identify gaps where your blog might fill a need.

Identifying Influencers

What's faster: convincing 500 people to buy something, or convincing one person who has 499 friends listening to her every word?

This is the key to growing your audience incredibly fast. Identifying influencers within your industry who will talk about your content, then creating content you know they'll pay attention to.

Quick ways to identify who's influential in a given category include the following:

Wefollow.com – These guys track who the most followed Twitter users are and let you cut it by category or keyword.

Muckrack.com – This is a Twitter directory of journalists, broken down by industry. Often journalists are very influential in a given niche, but more importantly they follow the major influencers in their niches. See who they retweet and interact with, then follow those people and repeat.

Take these people and make a list of what blogs they are posting links to, which people they are retweeting (in context of your topic, not just about breakfast), and who those people and blogs are talking about. You'll very soon be able to create a spreadsheet (or spider chart, if you roll that way), of who the most-read creators and spreaders are in your niche.

These are the people you're going to be writing to, because they're the people whose audience you're going to capture.

Many of these influencers attained their status by not only creating content of their own, but also by continually posting and tweeting and reblogging and plugging content that helps their followers. Oftentimes they'll give their stamp of endorsement to something that simply has a great title,

without reading first, but knowing it makes them look good to their followers.

Get to know their style, their habits, their quirks. Create a mini dossier (or a column in your spreadsheet) on each of them.

Down the road, this info will help you when brainstorming content that will spread through your industry.

Defining Voice & Angle

Pick-up lines are all about approach. Body language, eye contact, not being a creep, etc. Different people have different approaches that work... or don't work.

You can pull off a terrible pickup line if you're doing it in a tongue-in-cheek way. Then you can come off as actually funny. Or you can be totally smooth and confident. Either approach might work. (But the skeezball approach never does.)

It's a slightly strained analogy, but content is like pickup lines. Approach is everything.

Your content should be way better than a cheap pickup line. But if there's one thing you can learn from them it's this: it's not what you say, it's how you say it, that makes you memorable and attractive.

Take some time to decide what your blog's angle will be. Will you take an educational, formal approach? A witty, satirical approach?

Will you do data-driven content meant for journalists, like dating site OKCupid.com does with its OKTrends blog?

Will you be more about practical tips for the everyman, like Mint.com's MintLife Blog? Or will you be even more insidery, like Gawker?

If you don't have a voice in mind for your publication (most big brands do, but that doesn't stop you from doing something creative with a blog), think about what makes you unique. What unique assets do you have in terms of expertise, data, fans, or artistic flair?

Sites like TheLadders.com take advantage of their troves of user information, and create useful content from it. TheLadders is a job search site for $100k+ salary jobs. Its editorial team put together a series of posts featuring users who had done interesting things in order to secure employment.

They basically told their users' success stories.

This approach worked well for TheLadders when the company purposely left itself out of the stories. It wasn't "TheLadders totally helped Johnny get a job in health care…" but instead more like, "Johnny decided to look for design-related jobs in industries he'd never considered before, like health care…"

> ***A quick side note**: This brings up a good point. Plugging your product in your content has a 99% chance of chasing readers away forever. Good content strategy involves creating helpful information that builds trust between you and your readers. As soon as you jeopardize that trust with a sales pitch embedded in an article, it's all over. Your readers aren't dumb.*
>
> *Don't make them feel tricked.*

Jetsetter.com crafts aspirational, but honest stories about the hotels and locales it reviews. Park & Bond writes matter-of-fact fashion advice like the girl (or gay) friend you wish would tell you "no" before you put on the pink sweater. They each have their angle, and cultivate a voice and tone around it.

What will yours be?

Creating an Editorial Calendar

The next step is probably one of the simplest, and thus easily overlooked, steps to achieving great content. Even if you have your angle, voice, and audience figured out, you need to set up an editorial calendar to make sure you have a regular, clear schedule of who will be writing what when.

Let's go back to the gym. It's New Years Day, and you're proud of yourself for finally getting a membership and fulfilling the golden standard of New Years resolutions.

For the first two months you're exercising three times a week and it's great. Once March rolls around, you're getting busy, and realize you haven't worked out for a couple of weeks. On busy days, you'd rather relax than spend your free time curling dumbbells. By June, you never want to see that squat machine again. By July, you've ceremoniously burned your membership card.

The same sort of waning enthusiasm happens with blogging unless you set yourself a clear, regular schedule. Keeping yourself accountable is literally half the battle. Great content won't write itself.

The easiest way to organize your time is to set a weekly schedule, with each day of the week set aside for a different kind of piece. Mondays will be list posts, Tuesdays are for link roundups, and Wednesdays are about photo showcases. Etc, etc.

A calendar helps you battle two common barriers to consistency: idea block (now you have structure to follow in ideation) and excuses (you have an appointment with the gym rather than "gym hours").

Sticking to your schedule that is nicely varied across the

week will also help you from feeling like you'd rather actually go to the gym (that evil place) than sit down and write another blog post.

Maintaining a regular schedule is also useful for attracting more readers. If you publish your quintessentially clever blog posts every Monday at 9AM, your readers know exactly when to check in for their weekly dose of wit.

For more on editorial calendar creation, check out our how-to guide at http://contently.com/blog/content-strategy-101-how-to-create-an-editorial-calendar-for-your-blog/

Choosing Platforms for Publication & Promotion

Your content is your baby, but your content needs to leave the nest. Everything you write should be distributed across multiple platforms to target multiple audiences.

Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook are great for extending the reach of your content, and for getting varied audiences to come back to your posts on your blog.

Make sure, however, that you use each platform according to its strengths. For example, when I write a blog post I like to take the juiciest quote and post it on Tumblr, with a link to the full post. Then I'll tweet the headline and share a comment about it to my LinkedIn groups. Instantly, I've reached 4 separate audiences with the same content.

Before you start writing, shooting, or illustrating your content, you need to identify where you'll publish it, and where it will spread. Where does your audience hang out? How can you repurpose the same piece of content to be shared across multiple networks, to multiple groups?

When you share across different platforms you're also increasing your search engine rank.

Danny Sullivan, Editor-in-chief of SearchEngineLand, says "The links that you build through social media, the references, the authority – all can have an impact in various ways on how you are ranked and listed even in 'regular' search results."

Content that gets shared more widely right away automatically jumps up in the ranks on Google.

Sharing is indeed caring.

Setting Up Tracking

At this point I know you're itching to go write something.

But before you bust out another blog post about pickles and popsicles, let's head back to the gym for just one second.

Imagine you're still going everyday, working out like it's your job (cringe). After a few months you get on the scale and finally weigh yourself, expecting to be pleasantly surprised at your new svelte weight.

Then it hits you. You never weighed yourself in the beginning and now have no concrete way of seeing the change.

You'd be just as disappointed if this were your blog and not your bod. Getting tracking in place before you start is one of the most important steps in mastering your content strategy.

If you don't have any analytics in place, you'll have no way of tracking what you or your content is doing out there on the Web. Most unfortunately, every time you talk to your boss about content, you'll have to start each sentence with "it seems" or "I believe."

A few of the available analytics programs that we recommend are:

Google Analytics – It's free, feature-rich, and relatively easy to use if you're just starting out with analytics.

Newsbeat– Get real time analytics information about your content. Not free, but you do get to try it first.

Addthis – Allows you to add a super convenient bar of buttons to share your content for each major social media platform, and then track sharing. Also free.

Once you get more comfortable with analytics, check out social reach tools like Crowdbooster, which lets you see how far your content is penetrating into the Web, and Postling, a single management tool for your content across all social media platforms.

There are many other great analytics tools out there. It's not a bad idea to install multiple and see what works best for you.

PART 2: EXECUTING CONTENT STRATEGY

Dedicating Adequate Resources

You have every intention of creating amazing content. We all do. Just like we all want to get and stay in shape.

But if you're not setting aside an hour every day for that jog, you're probably going to quit before your shoes get dirty.

Same goes with content.

While your calendar should break up your writing across the week, it should also designate and record who is working on what projects.

Many businesses throw an intern – someone who barely knows what they're doing – at the blog. You've probably staggered across one or two of these blogs I'm talking about. They're the ones that haven't been updated since school started. Oh, and they've all got zero shares per post.

The businesses who are truly crushing it with their content strategy dedicate full-time, experienced staff, or work with professional freelance journalists and editors who know more about editorial processes than they do. BirchBox, Gilt Groupe, American Express, P&G. These are the businesses that print money with their content operations.

When you don't block off the necessary time to complete a project, it becomes all to easy (and tempting) to just squeeze it in hastily at the end.

And when you don't invest in quality... well, let's just say you get what you pay for.

Story Ideation

In general, it's pretty hard to just force an idea out of your head. The things that spur and jibe at our imagination tend to be loose, transient wisps that aren't easily commandeered, no matter when the deadline happens to be.

Force yourself too hard, and you inevitably feel mentally overexerted and stuck in a fit of writer's block.

Usually we don't take much stock in the ideas that randomly float into our head, but it can be incredibly useful to keep a running log of all these ideas. No matter how stupid they might be, keeping a running tally of ideas for every content channel you have is a great way of building up an idea bank.

Everything that happens to you can be fuel for content. Experiences you have, conversations you overhear, other people's blogs you read – all can be tied back to your niche and be fuel for content.

Troll Google News for ideas:

Search the news for your industry and see who has done or written something interesting recently. If you find something appealing, write your own piece as a comment or critique on it, adding your own spin and analysis.

Another ingenious way of taking advantage of Google News is seeing what topics are hot at the moment and piggy backing off of them. Craft your idea around the hot topic, or make your piece an analogy to it with a clear indication in your headline. *What Charlie Sheen Can Teach You About SEO*.

People will come clicking because it's trending.

Headlines are 90%

Twitter is nothing more than a stream of headlines. Great tweets get clicked and retweeted because they spark curiosity and discussion. Your post headlines should do the same.

As a culture, we are addicted to headlines. Our entire reaction to a piece can be based entirely on how good we think the headline is.

On the Internet or in magazines, the entire journalism industry is based around the winning headline. It's what makes you buy the magazine, click the link, or retweet the best description of a hipster you've ever read.

As most people don't read stories anyway, the headline is everything. People are more attracted to read a piece that has a real sticky headline, but (perhaps more importantly) they're also way more likely to share, retweet, or Like a story that has a catchy one as well, *if nothing more than to look good to their followers!*

So when you're writing your content, start with the headline first. Make it as sticky as possible. Think *Potentially Raunchy Ways Elmer Never Wanted You To Use His Glue* and then some.

Put your main points in the subhead next, since you've still got people's attention before losing them at the main text. Hopefully they'll now at least skim the rest of the text more aware.

One of my favorite resources for content strategy, Copyblogger has an amazing series on how to make headlines that rock (Google "Magnetic Headlines," and you'll find it.). "You'll Be Sorry That You Never Read This Post To Learn How To Write THE BEST HEADLINES EVER!"

I clicked on that even before I finished reading.

Writing Formulas

Everyone remembers their 5th grade teacher who pounded it into their brains that an "essay" meant exactly five paragraphs – intro, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion – and nothing else.

Some bloggers still stick to such rigid formulas, but that doesn't mean you should. Take Thrillist.com for example: nearly all of this men's lifestyle newsletter's content essentially follows the same pattern. Three to four paragraphs formulating an argument for why this bar rocks or these sunglasses are no longer cool. You can imagine the editor ticking off the necessary points from a rubric.

It works beautifully for their audience. Thrillist just made it to the Inc 500 for its massive growth.

You don't need to be that specific, but you should figure out what kind of formula works for you and how you're going to optimize the crap out of it.

Experiment with different posts. Do your short, 500 word posts work best? What about longer, 1,000 words posts? Slideshows versus link roundups? Are you going to have a rigid content formula or let it all just hang loose?

Check the metrics behind each kind of post as you experiment, taking note of which kind of content formula is actually getting you the most visitors, the most shares, and the most comments.

Then max out on what works.

Setting Yourself Apart

Let's talk again about angle and your voice. These are two of the most important aspects of turning your content into a brand because they make you stand apart.

Very few companies actually do a good job of making their content look and sound unique enough to turn it into a memorable brand, making this step all the more important.

One good example is Mint.com, the personal finance management software. Mint's blog became what felt like an instant hit in social media, setting itself apart through clever, magazine-style writing and cool infographics. At the start of the financial crisis, no other blog was doing this, but everyone was talking about billions and billions of dollars just magically disappearing.

Mint made eye catching (and hair raising) infographics showing how one trillion dollars actually physically compares to a football field, and how many islands that much money could buy.

Mint quickly became "that blog" that made "all those cool graphs." In other words, they became the trend setter for catchy financial content, which then began to be imitated on other financial and business blogs.

Another example is Cracked.com, which makes the most ridiculous, hilarious headlines that it almost pains you not to click on them. They're not exactly crass, but they're definitely not normal. Combined with an all around air of a pretty good investigative shenanigans, Cracked gets millions of page views.

Now that you're executing content every day, work on setting yourself apart.

Publishing, Distribution, & Promotion

Everyone already knows that when a tree falls in the forest, but no one's there to hear it, it makes the most metaphysically obscure of sounds.

This classic dilemma is no different with blog posts. If you wrote a post and no one ever comes to read it, did it ever really do anything? Of course not, it was a pretty fantastic waste of time and money.

That's why you've got to see that distribution and promotion always go hand in hand with content strategy. You're investing all your time and brain power in creating awesome content, so you better want people to actually read it, and, daresay, like it.

As with anything in life, there are the free ways and the paid ways of doing things. Sticking with only one or the other will inevitably leave your content limping out there, either because it doesn't have enough of a push or because it doesn't know where to go.

One of the paid tools that I really like is Outbrain.com. Outbrain puts links to your headlines at the end of posts on relevant blogs and news sites. Your link goes under the heading of related content that the reader might like, and that way you're already getting someone who is interested in your content. It's also a neat tool to see just how shareable your content really is.

While Outbrain is basically buying clicks, there are free ways to get your content out there, too.

One great method that I've really gotten into is making a list of all the big influencers in the content industry, and then pitching them to write a guest post on their blog. I'll do it for free, but I ask for a proper byline and a link back to Contently.

Now I've turned the influencer's 499 friends into my friends. Just like with retweets, massive amounts of readers will take the influencer's endorsement of my guest post as a sign that I must be pretty awesome. The link back then funnels traffic towards our site, where people read our company blog and end up signing up for our services.

But when you make your list, don't go hitting the top dog right away. Instead, start at the bottom with the guy who wishes he were the top dog, but is struggling to get started. Offer the lower rungs your guest posts first, and use those posts as credentials to climb higher and higher up the influencer ladder.

It's not really a traditional way of getting your company or content promoted, but it definitely gets results.

After you've gotten a good number of guest posts under you belt, start looking for syndication deals. Since the journalism industry is pretty much on its knees because of declining ad revenues and the inability to produce more and more quality content, they're constantly looking for new material. If your stuff is good, you might be able to strike something up.

Look for other industry sites, especially news sites for your niche, and offer them a deal. They can use your quality content, particularly as supplementary analysis material, and they'll be glad to do it, especially if you're credible and good.

Influencing Influencers

When starting out with content strategy, we try hard to imagine how our audience will react to our content, and fine tweak it accordingly.

But from what we've already talked about, your audience at large's reaction is not nearly as important as winning over the influencers.

Sometimes you'll be trying to get at a few influencers, and other times it'll be just one.

In my case, it was one Fred Wilson.

Fred Wilson is a partner at the VC firm Union Square Ventures and an avid blogger with a massive and obedient following. When I first moved to New York, I decided that if I wanted to get on the local tech scene radar, I needed Fred to know who I was.

So I tried to learn as much about Fred as I could. I figured out what he liked (music, blogging at 6AM), disliked (long e-mails), and read about a year's worth of his posts.

I had used to play in bands before I got into tech. So I made an infographic called, "Rock Bands vs Tech Startups." The chart compared putting together a rock band ("Righteous drumming, dude!") and a tech startup ("Righteous c0ding, dud3!"), and how the life cycles of each were really quite similar.

I sent a link to my published version of Rock Bands vs Tech Startups to Fred at 3AM on a Monday morning with the title of the chart as the subject, and a short message, "Hey Fred, I though you might like this. Shane."

When Fred woke up early on Monday to write his blog, my email was probably the first one he saw.

When I woke up late on Monday, I saw that Fred had written about me on his blog.

Not only did I got tons and tons of traffic at the time, but a year later when I was starting my own startup and wanted to talk with Fred Wilson, I replied to the same e-mail thread asking if I could come and pitch my idea. Fred said, "Righteous." (Ok, he actually just said, "Sure.")

Besides for being an awesome conversation starter at geek meetups, this story is all about the importance of getting to know your influencers. Learn their habits, tastes, what they care about, and what you think they'll be interested in (or amused by) enough to share and retweet it with the rest of their followers.

Since then I've made it a hobby to systematically target a new influencer every week, just going down a list, to try and get them to share some of my own content. It's a really great way to grow your own traffic and gain a ton of readers (maybe even get an awesome story).

Keeping Your Audience Around

Of course, all this content strategy know-how is worthless if you just keep on getting one night blog stands. You want you readers to stick around, read more stuff, become more engaged, and even find out more about you.

There are a couple easy ways you can get your audience more engaged and more likely to hang around.

One of the best ways to keep your audience around is to adopt what should be called the Wikipedia Link Luring Wormhole.

It's happened to everyone. You're at Wikipedia looking something up, and then you click a link about something your vaguely interested in. On that next page, you find another link about that strange Roman emperor you always wanted to know more about.

Next thing you know, you've been on Wikipedia for forty five minutes, jumping from to page to page all through internal links between articles.

This is one of the greatest strengths of the open source encyclopedia, and you should copy it on your blog. In every post, each paragraph should have at least one link to another post on your blog, bringing the reader in deeper.

If you're lucky they might never leave.

Another way of getting more engagement is by putting links for related posts at the bottom. These can lead to your other content on site or content by another author, as long as it's helpful.

Readers will be quick to catch on if links correspond to some sort of plug or sales pitch. But if they get the impression that they're being offered useful information

and not just shameless self promotion, it'll go a long way in building solid reader loyalty.

You should also be collecting as many e-mail addresses as you can, and getting everyone you can to follow you. Don't make the "Follow me", "Share this" or "Subscribe to our newsletter" options so small and tucked away in a corner that no one ever notices them. Make them bold, but not annoying.

These two plug-ins can also be especially useful for this purpose:

SimpleReach – Put a NYTimes.com-like sliding bar at the bottom of your blog posts that recommends other related content. Also includes ability to share across Facebook and Twitter.

Zemanta – Content production plugin that automates the process of adding internal links to other blog posts, images, tags, and related content.

PART 3: EXECUTING CONTENT STRATEGY

Measuring ROI: Basic Metrics

This last section is all about making sure your content isn't just "words on a page." Remember, you're reading this because you believe in the power of content, so now it's time to measure your content up to your goals.

Whether you're a personal blogger trying to brand yourself through social media, or director of digital content at a company, you've got to be measuring the reach and power of your work.

This is especially true for those working in a company. Over the long run, all the content you produce will begin to show results, but they aren't outwardly apparent just quite yet in the short term. It's the Gym Dilemma all over again. You need to prove to those unbelievers (like perhaps your boss) that content can work, and that it's producing results right then.

The main metrics you'll want to show for measuring straight ROI on content are conversions. This could be leads, sales, or sign ups. There are also less well known derivatives of these metrics, such as quality of leads and time to close conversions.

Another metric that will bolster your case is the number of people that conversions are referring. As this metric increases, you know that you're getting more valuable customers since good content is infectious, and people will start sharing it on their own accord.

Some people might snicker at your ideas of feel good content and qualitative nonsense in the face of cold, hard business facts. These people are obviously living in the stone age and will probably go extinct pretty soon anyway.

All these metrics are also attributable to content, and therein lies the power.

Measuring ROI: Proxies

Sometimes you'll find that it's impossible to measure your ROI using such straightforward metrics as conversions, especially in the early days where everything is slowly growing and evidence seems purely anecdotal. When that happens, you can to turn to proxies.

Since you can't observe some metrics directly, you need to look for their after effects and lingering qualities, just as a scientist would look for clues of climate change in centuries-old ice.

You find yourself using proxies when you realize that you can't tell for sure that a particular lead came from a particular blog post specifically. This aspect of content measurement is all about the effects in the aggregate. Proxies are great for seeing just how well you're actually getting your brand into your readers' lives through content.

If your proxies look positive, then your brand is getting stronger and awareness of your content is clearly growing. You should be seeing greater customer engagement and trust, which should lead to more business.

You should make sure to pay attention to some of these:

Sharing across social networks – This is a very good proxy which will give you a good indication for how shareable, engaging, and interesting your content actually is. It will also give you a very rough estimate for your content's web penetration.

Time proxies – You can measure how much time readers spend on each page, as larger amounts typically mean that people are reading more. Another useful proxy is the total time gained with readers per month. You

take the number of visitors multiplied by the average amount of time that visitors spend on a page. This quick calculation gives you a rough estimate of how engagement with your readers is changing month by month. As the number increases, that's a great sign for your brand's success.

Engagement (comments and answers) – It's much easier to read something and snort about it indignantly to yourself than actually publish a critical comment. If you see your comments growing, that's a good proxy for vibrant engagement with your readers.

But since comments are difficult to kickstart, especially if would-be commenters see "0 comments" on most posts, I use a powerful tool to increase engagement called Urtak.

Urtak is an embeddable, never-ending polling widget that asks "Yes/No/Don't Care" questions which anyone can submit. It's a democratization of the comments space that yields very interesting results.

Number of pages visited per visit – Along with time, this proxy gives you a better idea of how deep into your content readers are actually getting.

We've written a lot about content strategy ROI on our own blog. Check out http://contently.com/blog/how-to-measure-roi-on-your-content-strategy/ for more in-depth guides.

Using Data to Optimize Your Strategy

Some people really love data, and some people pretty much despise anything to do with numbers. It's befitting that content optimization is all about striking a neat balance between quantitative and qualitative.

The metrics that you gather mean nothing unless you find a way to actually put them to good use and make your content better. Going to your boss and saying, "Hey Randall! Check out how many visitors we've got it!" is cool, but it's not really useful unless you take action on that data.

Randall would've been so much more pleased to know that it was actually the list posts that got the most views, and that they were getting tweeted like a hot pastrami sandwich at @CarnegieDeli.

Likewise if you see that certain writers are getting many more results than others, have them write the edgier stories to elicit more engagement.

Metrics let you be extremely specific with how you address the fundamental structure and formula of your content. Don't let that huge advantage go to waste. Once you can see what kinds of features in your content are the most successful, work on maximizing those features and playing to your strengths.

CONCLUSION

This Is Just The Beginning

Planning, executing, optimizing. It's not a one-time deal. It's an ongoing process. New verticals, new topics, new content. Once you experience the power of a great content strategy, you'll do everything you can to create more of it.

Trust me, you will!

We started this book out talking about how content strategy is like exercise: results are gradual, but dramatic over time. Now that you're probably sick of the analogy, I thought I'd pound it in one more time.

You'll never look like Arnold if you lift weights once a week for a month, then stop.

Likewise, you'll never be a lead-generating machine like Mint.com's blog, or Amex's Open Forum, if you stick an intern on a post a week until summer's over.

You've got it? Awesome. Send me a link to your blog sometime!

Shane & The Contently.com Team
www.contently.com

Check out our blog, The Content Strategist, at contently.com/blog

Special thanks to Danny Landau.

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